

Week #:	192	Series:	God's Judgment	Title:	Abimelech's Conspiracy
Scriptures:	Judges 8:30-9:21				
Songs:	Holy Forever – Chris Tomlin (5:08)				
	Medley: I Sing Praises / I Just Want to Praise You / We Exalt Thee - Reggie Royal & Judah (10:24)				
	Prayer	Let It Rain (3:23)			
Videos:	Judges Song – What's in the Bible #4 (Time- 31:31-33:25)				

### Abimelech's Conspiracy:

The first five judges in our study have been:

1. Othniel: He was Caleb's nephew. Israel lived in peace after him for 40 years.
2. Ehud: He was known for the physical feature of being left-handed. Israel lived in peace after him for 80 years.
3. Shamgar: He was known for killing 600 Philistines with a farm tool, an oxgoad.
4. Deborah: She was a female prophetess, whom God used to free the people from Jabin [Yavin], King of Hazor, and his commander Sisera.
5. Gideon: Called God's valiant hero. Israel lived in peace for 40 years, until he died.

### Judges 8:30-35

<sup>30</sup> Gid'on [Gideon] became the father of seventy sons, because he had many wives. <sup>31</sup> He also had a concubine in Sh'khem [Shechem], and she too bore him a son, whom he called Avimelekh [Abimelech]. <sup>32</sup> Gid'on [Gideon] the son of Yo'ash [Joash] died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Yo'ash [Joash], in 'Ofrah of the Avi'ezri [Abiezrites].

<sup>33</sup> But as soon as Gid'on [Gideon] was dead, the people of Isra'el again went astray after the *ba'alim* and made Ba'al-B'rit their god. <sup>34</sup> They forgot *ADONAI* their God, who had saved them from the power of all their enemies on every side; <sup>35</sup> and they showed no kindness toward the family of Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)], that is, Gid'on [Gideon], to repay them for all the good he had done for Isra'el.

Gideon ruled as a legitimate Judge (Shophet) of Israel for 40 years. He was God appointed, God anointed, and performed in the typical way of a Judge: he was first a deliverer of some portion of Israel from the hand of an oppressor and then he ruled for a time.

As was also typical, quickly after each Judge died from old age the people of Israel would harden their hearts and revert to idolatry. Usually, each cycle explains that the people forgot or abandoned Yehoveh, their God, despite the wonderful and fully visible things He did for them. Here it adds that the people showed no kindness to the descendants of Gideon (called Yeruba'al/Jerubbaal, meaning the Ba'al fighter). In Hebrew it says that the people offered no *chesed*, which in this context carries with it the concept of covenant loyalty.

*Chesed* in Hebrew culture then and today means acts of charity, mercy, and kindness; it also tilts towards all these acts being done out of a sense of faithfulness to God and (to a lesser degree) loyalty to a person who merits such loyalty. We know that while Gideon had officially and publicly rejected kingship over the people, yet in many ways he lived and behaved and, in some ways, ruled more like royalty. So, there must have been some kind of semi-formal relationship or agreement between the central-northern tribes of Israel that he judged over such that his family was seen as the rightful ruling family (a concept quite different from that of the earlier Judges whereby a Judge was less an absolute ruler and more of a powerful magistrate). Thus, the context of the coming story is set in this background that shows that at the least portions of Israel were warming to the idea of a monarchy ruling over them, and some wanted a king NOW.

The brief and ill-fated story of Abimelech is the subject of Judges 9. This man was NOT a Judge. In fact, some wonder why this episode is even included as the story is somewhat of an antithesis of the previous 2 chapters in that while Gideon was a common man, raised up by God to be a Judge, and then serving the Lord in order to deliver His people from oppression, Abimelech was born into privilege, appointed himself as a leader of God's people, then served only his own personal lust for power in order to oppress his people. That would be bad enough if it wasn't for Abimelech being Gideon's own son.

Abimelech (name meaning: *my-father-is-king*), son of Gideon, is not a divinely chosen judge of Israel. He is a usurper who murdered his own half-brothers and their sons to acquire power. Therefore, retribution becomes the theme of the narrative of Abimelech, a man who reflects Israel's moral decay. The theme of retribution is made explicit in two summary statements that complement each other in 9:23-24 and 56-57. The narrative itself can be divided into three parts, each representing a stage in Abimelech's career that begins after 40 years of peace followed by Gideon's death:

1. Abimelech becomes king after murdering his kinsmen (9:1-6)
2. Jotham's fable (9:7-21)
3. Abimelech's decline and fall (9:22-57)

#### Judges 9:1-21

<sup>1</sup> Avimelekh [Abimelech] the son of Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)] went to Sh'khem [Shechem], to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with the whole clan of his maternal grandfather. He said, <sup>2</sup> "Please ask all the men of Sh'khem [Shechem], 'Which is better for you — that all seventy sons of Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)] rule over you, or that one person rule over you? And remember that I am your blood relative.'" <sup>3</sup> His mother's brothers spoke to all the men of Sh'khem [Shechem] and said all this about him, so that they followed their feelings and supported Avimelekh [Abimelech], arguing, "After all, he's our brother." <sup>4</sup> They also gave him seventy pieces of silver from the temple of Ba'al-B'rit; and he used these to pay good-for-nothing thugs to follow him. <sup>5</sup> He went back to his father's house in 'Ofrah and killed his brothers the sons of Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)], all seventy of them, on a single rock, except for Yotam [Jotham] Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)]'s youngest son, who stayed alive because he hid himself.

<sup>6</sup> All the men of Sh'khem [Shechem] and all Beit-Millo got together and went and made Avimelekh [Abimelech] king at the oak by the cult-pillar in Sh'khem [Shechem].

Notice that in chapter nine Gideon's Israelite name is no longer used. We only hear the pagan name given to him by his hometown, Jerubbaal, "contends with Baal." Also notice that God's covenant name is not used in the entire Abimelech narrative. The last time God's covenant name, Yahweh, was used was in Judges 8:34 at the end of the Gideon narrative: *The Israelites no longer remembered Yahweh their God, who rescued them from all the enemies round them.* The divine name will not be used again until the narrative that begins in Judges 10:6.

The city of Shechem is located about forty miles north of Jerusalem near the mountain pass between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. It was designated a Levitical city of refuge (Josh 20:1-3, 7), but the Canaanites had not been driven out of the city and lived side by side with the Israelites. Gideon declined the offer to become Israel's king but he ruled like a king and gave the son of his slave girl a name that reflected the idea of his power in Israel: "*my-father-is-king*" = Abimelech.

Gideon-Jerubbaal acquired a concubine from the city of Shechem with whom he had a son. A good argument can be made from the text that Abimelech's mother was a Canaanite slave and not an Israelite

How did Abimelech become king of Shechem? He convinced his uncles that it was to their advantage to have a kinsman rule over them instead of the Israelite sons of Gideon. They financed his revolt and he hired a mercenary army to attack and execute his half-brothers and probably their sons at the village of Ophrah.

What is the significance of the seventy silver pieces Abimelech received from the pagan temple treasury? He received one piece of silver to pay for taking each of the lives of his seventy Israelite kinsmen.

That there were seventy "brothers/kinsmen" after forty years of peace and until after Gideon's death suggests that Gideon had sons and grandsons. As you will recall, the invitation to Gideon to become king and rule over the Israelites mentioned not only his son but his grandson. In the Bible, descendants are referred to as "sons;" for example as in "Jesus son of David" (Mt 1:1). That they were all killed on the same stone means that were all executed and not killed in fighting. One wonders if it was the same stone/rock where God accepted Gideon's offering in Judges 6:21. If so, that stone now receives the unholy sacrifice of Gideon's sons.

Did any of Abimelech's half-brothers and their sons survive? Only his youngest brother/kinsman Jotham survived.

Judges 9:7-15

<sup>7</sup> When they told this to Yotam [Jotham], he went and stood on top of Mount G'rizim and shouted, "Listen to me, you leaders of Sh'khem [Shechem]; then God will listen to you!" <sup>8</sup> Once the trees went out to choose a king to rule them. They said to the olive tree, 'Rule over us!' <sup>9</sup> But the olive tree replied, 'Am I supposed to leave my oil, which is used to honor both God and humanity, just to go and hold sway over the trees?' <sup>10</sup> So the trees said to the fig tree, 'You, come and rule over us!' <sup>11</sup> But the fig tree replied, 'Am I supposed to leave my sweetness and my good fruit just to go and hold sway over the trees?' <sup>12</sup> So the trees said to the grapevine, 'You, come and rule over us!' <sup>13</sup> But the grapevine replied, 'Am I supposed to leave my wine, which gives cheer to God and humanity, just to go and hold sway over the trees?' <sup>14</sup> Finally, all the trees said to the thorn bush, 'You, come and rule over us!' <sup>15</sup> The thorn bush replied, 'If you really make me king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade. But if not, let fire come out of the thorn bush and burn down the cedars of the L'vanon [Lebanon]!'

This is the earliest parable in the Bible using plants as an example in addressing human morality. For Jotham, standing on the mountain to deliver his parable affords him a protective distance from his enemies. It does not matter that the people of Shechem cannot hear him because the delivery of the parable in the form of a curse is what matters. It was on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim that blessings and curse judgments of the Sinai Covenant were repeated to the Israelites in the covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua 8:30-35 that God commanded Moses to hold in Deuteronomy 11:26-32. Shechem was over-looked by Mount Gerizim to the south.

We will explore more about this symbolism after we read this last part of our scripture for today.

Judges 9:16-21

<sup>16</sup> "Here's the point. Have you been honest and straightforward in making Avimelekh [Abimelech] king? Have you been fair with Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)] and his household and treated him as he deserves? <sup>17</sup> My father fought on your behalf, risking his life, and rescued you from the power of Midyan; <sup>18</sup> and now you are rebelling against my father's household. You've killed his seventy sons on a single stone and made Avimelekh [Abimelech], the son of his slave-girl, king over the men of

Sh'khem [Shechem], because he's your brother. <sup>19</sup> I say this: if you are dealing honestly and righteously with Yeruba'al [Jerubbaal (Gideon)] and his household today, then may you enjoy Avimelekh [Abimelech] and may he enjoy you! <sup>20</sup> But if not, let fire come out from Avimelekh [Abimelech] and burn up the men of Sh'khem [Shechem] and Beit-Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Sh'khem [Shechem] and Beit-Millo and burn up Avimelekh [Abimelech]!" <sup>21</sup> Then Yotam [Jotham] fled, making his way to Be'er, and he lived there for fear of Avimelekh [Abimelech] his brother.

Jotham challenges the leaders of Shechem to an examination of conscience. If they can truthfully say they acted in good conscience, he wishes them well. If, however, they have acted ungratefully and deceitfully he calls down a curse judgment upon them that the *baalim* of Shechem and Abimelech destroy each other.

How many times is the name of Yahweh invoked in Jotham's cry for justice and curse against the murderers of his kinsmen? Yahweh, the God of Israel is not invoked in the parable or in the curse. Only pagan gods are mentioned. Only pagan gods anoint themselves with oil (or their priests anointed the images with oil) and pagan gods are believed to drink wine. Yahweh is never depicted reveling in the same way men do, but the pagan gods were understood as having all the same vices as men. Jotham sought refuge in Beer, an unknown location. Beer means *well*.

Back to the symbolism found here in this chapter.

The key to the symbolic elements of the parable are found in Judges 8:22 in the offer of kingship that was made and declined by Gideon for himself, his son and his grandson.

Symbolic element	What the symbolic element represents
The trees searching for a king	Men of Israel searching for a king
The olive tree	Gideon
The fig tree	Gideon's son(s)
The vine	Gideon's grandson(s)
The thorn bush	Abimelech
Cedars of Lebanon	Leaders of Shechem

In verse 15 "shade" is a word often used in the Bible to mean "protection" as the shade protects one from the scorching sun. A king was expected to protect/shade his people. The thorn bush/Abimelech offers an ultimatum: his protection to those who acknowledge him as king but "fire" to those who do not. "Fire" is often a symbol of destruction or purification. In this case it is a symbol of destruction.

The thorn tree/Abimelech has no "fruit" to offer only sharp thorns good for nothing. Instead, he lies when he promises shade/protection since the thorn tree is not big enough to provide shade. His threat is if he is not made king that he will destroy the other "trees," no matter if they are as powerful as the great trees of Lebanon/Shechem's leaders, with fire/war in which their city and their citizens will be burned and destroyed.

Next week we will explore further into Abimelech's decline and fall.